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60th ANNIVERSARY
SEASON
2014-15

PRESS RELEASE

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Houston Grand Opera Announces 2015–16 HGO Studio Artists

Houston, March 5, 2015—After a worldwide search, Houston Grand Opera has chosen seven new members for the 2015–16 HGO Studio program. One of the most respected and highly competitive young artist programs in the world, the HGO Studio provides comprehensive career development to young singers, pianist/coaches, and conductors who have demonstrated potential to make major contributions to the field of opera. The HGO Studio received applications from 500 artists; of those, about 275 were heard in Houston, New York, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, and San Francisco. For singers, the audition process culminates in HGO’s annual Eleanor McCollum Competition Concert of Arias, held this year on February 5.

During a residency of up to three years, HGO Studio artists receive specialized training in voice, movement, and languages and are afforded numerous performance opportunities. The HGO Studio is distinguished from other young artist programs by its high level of integration between the Studio members and main-stage artists and production teams. Studio artists are often cast in major and supporting roles in main-stage productions, giving them the opportunity to work with world-renowned artists, directors, and conductors. They also participate in recital series and perform in venues across the city and state for numerous events.

The HGO Studio trains young artists in their chosen discipline of classical singing, piano and coaching, or conducting. The distinguished incoming Studio artists hail from Armenia, Argentina, China, and Russia as well as the United States. The newcomers include two alumni of HGO’s Young Artists Vocal Academy, which has been serving exceptional undergraduate singers for the past four years.

“These extraordinary individuals will make vital contributions to the musical life of Houston and to the field of opera as a whole,” said HGO Studio Director Brian Speck. “We are particularly pleased that two of the new artists trained in our Young Artists Vocal Academy.”

Founded in 1977 by composer Carlisle Floyd and HGO’s then–General Director David Gockley, the

HGO Studio was established to help young artists transition from their academic training to careers in opera. Members commit to an intense, individualized study program while living in Houston from mid-August through May.

First-year HGO Studio artists are:

Mane Galoyan—soprano
Chris Bozeka—tenor
Yongzhao Yu—tenor
Ben Edquist—baritone
Federico De Michelis—bass-baritone
Kirill Kuzmin—pianist/coach
Geoffrey Loff—pianist/coach

Returning HGO Studio artists are:

Pureum Jo—soprano
D’Ana Lombard—soprano
Megan Samarin—mezzo-soprano
Sofia Selowsky—mezzo-soprano
Sahar Nouri—pianist/coach

2015–16 HGO Studio artist biographies:

Mane Galoyan
Soprano—Armenia

Mane Galoyan won first prize in HGO’s 2015 Eleanor McCollum Competition Concert of Arias and participated in HGO’s Young Artists Vocal Academy last May. She has won a number of prestigious awards, most recently a 2014 prize in the Hans Gabor Belvedere Competition in Dusseldorf, Germany; first prize in the International Singing Competition by Bibigul Tulegenova in Kazakhstan; and fourth prize in the Sixth International Competition of Young Opera Singers in Ningbo, China, after which she was invited back to China to participate in Christmas concerts given by the competition laureates. Other prestigious honors include the gold medal at the Seventh Open Youth Delphic Games in Kazakhstan, the President of Armenia Youth Prize, and second prize in the International Opera Singers Competition in St. Petersburg. She has toured in the United States with the YerazArt program and in Great Britain within the framework of the young talent support program of the All Armenia Fund.

Chris Bozeka
Tenor—United States

Chris Bozeka won second prize in HGO’s 2015 Eleanor McCollum Competition Concert of Arias. He is pursuing a master’s degree at the University of Cincinnati College–Conservatory of Music (CCM), where he has appeared as Nemorino in *The Elixir of Love*, Ernesto in *Don Pasquale*, and the Narrator in *Owen Wingrave*. Bozeka was a winner at the 2014 Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions–Ohio District. Last summer, he appeared in the Castleton Festival, alternating as B. F. Pinkerton and Goro in *Madame Butterfly* and appearing as a featured soloist in U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s *Law and Opera* lecture. Bozeka was seen previously at the Castleton Festival under the baton of Lorin Maazel as Joe in *La*

fanciulla del West, Cassio in *Otello*, and as a featured soloist alongside Neil Schicoff in *A Salute to Britten and Tchaikovsky*. He has also sung Joe with the Orquesta Sinfónica de Galicia, Sam Polk in *Susannah* with Undercroft Opera, and Marco in *The Gondoliers* at Capital University in Columbus, Ohio, where he earned his bachelor's degree

Yongzhao Yu
Tenor—China

Yongzhao Yu won the Ana María Martínez Encouragement and Audience Choice awards in HGO's 2015 Eleanor McCollum Competition Concert of Arias. In 2012, he began work on a master's degree in the opera department of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. He performed Alfredo in *La traviata* and in February 2012, he participated in a special Valentine's Day concert opera performance in the concert hall of the Shanghai Oriental Art Center. He was selected for membership in the Shanghai International Vocal Music Master Class in the summer of 2012. He performed in a special concert titled "Greetings of Love" in the Grand Theatre of the Suzhou Culture and Arts Center in March 2013, followed in May by an "Eternal Verdi" concert in Shanghai in honor of the bicentenary of Verdi's birth. His awards include third prize in bel canto in the Shanghai division of the 15th National Youth Singer TV Competition, second prize in the men's division of the Beijing International Music Competition, and first prize in the Opera Concorso.

Ben Edquist
Baritone—United States

Ben Edquist, originally from Lake Jackson, Texas, was a Finalist in HGO's 2015 Eleanor McCollum Competition Concert of Arias and participated in HGO's Young Artists Vocal Academy in 2013. He will receive his master of music degree from Rice University this May. His most notable operatic roles include Sid in *Albert Herring*, Antonio in *The Marriage of Figaro*, Charlie in Jake Heggie's *Three Decembers*, and Guglielmo in *Così fan tutte*. He has performed many musical theater roles with Light Opera Oklahoma and Brazosport Center Stages including Gaston in *Beauty and the Beast*, Roy in *The Light in the Piazza*, Barnaby Tucker in *Hello, Dolly!*, and Nathan Detroit in *Gypsy and Dolls*. Edquist was a young artist with the Glimmerglass Festival this past summer where he performed the role of Jigger Craigin in *Carousel* and will be returning this summer to sing the role of Papageno in *The Magic Flute*. He is the winner of the 2014 Lotte Lenya Competition.

Federico De Michelis
Bass-baritone—Argentina

Born in Buenos Aires, Federico De Michelis won third prize in HGO's 2015 Eleanor McCollum Competition Concert of Arias. He was a member of the Opera Studio of Teatro Argentino de La Plata, where he performed Antonio in *Il viaggio a Reims*, El Hombre Mayor in Gerardo Gandini's contemporary opera *Ciudad Ausente*, Johann in *Werther*, Narrator from Nino Rota's *I due timidi*, Don Alfonso in *Così fan tutte*, Plutone in *Il ballo dell'ingrate*, and Tempo from *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria*. Since 2012, he has been training at the Escuela Superior de Música Reina Sofía in Madrid, Spain, studying with Ryland Davies, Tom Krause, and Manuel Cid and performing in some of the most important concert halls in Spain. His repertoire includes Don Magnifico in *La Cenerentola*, Tom and Sam in *A Masked Ball*, and Dr. Grenvil in *La traviata*. During summer 2014 he made his debut with the Nuremberg Symphony Orchestra conducted by Paul Weigold.

Kirill Kuzmin

Pianist/coach—Russia

Kirill Kuzmin was born in Moscow. He began his piano training in a music school at the age of four. He continued his studies at the State Musical College in Moscow and then at the Moscow State Conservatory. While a student of the conservatory, he performed in several concert tours as a soloist. After graduation, he entered the Young Artists Program of the Bolshoi Theater of Russia, and then worked for that company as a pianist and coach, participating in a number of opera productions. In 2014, he was a member of San Francisco Opera's Merola Program. Currently he is a collaborative piano student at the University of Michigan, where he studies with Martin Katz.

Geoffrey Loff

Pianist/coach—United States

Geoffrey Loff, from Miami, Florida, is a répétiteur, collaborative and solo pianist, assistant conductor, and composer. He made his concert debut at age 13 and has performed as a soloist for The Chopin Foundation and the International Miami Piano Festival. An advocate of opera and symphonic transcriptions, he has performed such rarities as Liszt's transcriptions of Wagner's Overture to *Tannhäuser* and Beethoven's Symphony No. 5, and Rachmaninoff's transcription of the Scherzo from Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. As a collaborative pianist, he has been a frequent performer for The Mainly Mozart Festival and the Chopin Foundation. In 2008, he was commissioned by the Greater Miami Jewish Federation to compose and perform a piano trio at the 70th anniversary memorial of Kristallnacht at the Miami Beach Holocaust Museum. He was pianist and music director for Atlanta Opera's outreach program (2012–13), young artist and assistant conductor for Opera North (2013), and resident artist for Minnesota Opera (2013–15). Loff has been a staff pianist for the John Duffy Modern Opera Institute (2013, 2014) and staff pianist and assistant conductor for the Janiec Opera Company as part of the Brevard Music Festival (2015). Upcoming engagements include staff pianist and assistant conductor positions for Skylark Opera and Mill City Opera. He holds bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Miami.

About Houston Grand Opera

Since its inception in 1955, Houston Grand Opera has grown from a small regional organization into an internationally renowned opera company. HGO enjoys a reputation for commissioning and producing new works, including 56 world premieres and seven American premieres since 1973. In addition to producing and performing world-class opera, HGO contributes to the cultural enrichment of Houston and the nation through a diverse and innovative program of performances, community events, and education projects that reaches the widest possible public. HGO has toured extensively, including trips to Europe and Asia, and has won a Tony, two Grammy awards, and two Emmy awards—the only opera company to have won all three honors.

Through HGOco, Houston Grand Opera creates opportunities for Houstonians of all ages and backgrounds to observe, participate in, and create art. HGOco's *Song of Houston* project is an ongoing initiative to create and share work based on stories that define the unique character of our city and its diverse cultures. Since 2007, HGOco has commissioned 16 new works along with countless innovative community projects, reaching

more than one million people in the greater Houston metropolitan area. The NEXUS Initiative is HGO's multi-year ticket underwriting program that allows Houstonians of all ages and backgrounds to enjoy world-class opera without the barrier of price. Since 2007 NEXUS has enabled more than 175,000 Houstonians to experience first-quality opera through discounted single tickets and subscriptions, subsidized student performances, and free productions.

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